

# Xander Bogaerts's roots in Aruba were humble

By Stan Grossfeld

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**Red Sox infielder Xander Bogaerts trots around the outfield of the ballpark named after him in his hometown in Aruba.**

SAN NICOLAS, Aruba — In the summer of 2009, Xander Bogaerts had the chicken pox, a 102-degree fever, and skin that was, in his words, “itchy, itchy, itchy.”

Word was passed that there was a baseball tryout that day, with a scout from the United States.

“We didn’t know who was coming,” says Bogaerts, flashing a grin from the couch at his uncle’s house, where he learned to hit as a baby.

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But Bogaerts, then a skinny 16-year-old, needed bed rest, not baseball.

So his twin brother, Jair, grabbed his glove and went down to the rocky, sandy ballfield alone.

That's when he met the Lord.

Mike Lord, then a Red Sox scout, was blond and tall, looking like one of the Beach Boys.

"When I got there, there was only nine guys — it's a small island," says Lord, who proceeded to hit fungoes and pitch batting practice.

At the end of the workout, Lord asked the same question that the late, great journalist David Halberstam always asked.

"Is there anybody else I need to see?"

Jair, a catcher and the best player at the tryout, didn't hesitate.

"He says, 'I told you, man, my brother is better than me,' " says Lord. "A couple of other people poking around said, 'Yeah, Xander's the guy.' "

But Xander had been in bed for two weeks.

"So I said, how are we going to get to him?" relates Lord.

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Bogaerts's uncle, Glenroy Brown, already knew something was up.

"A little bird told me," he says.

Brown, tall and affable, worked in the hotel industry for 21 years. He has coached baseball equally as long. He also served as a father figure to the Bogaerts boys after their father moved to Hong Kong when they were 2.

"They were born to play baseball," Brown says.

Brown devised a training routine for Xander like no other. Instead of tee ball, Xander would play almond ball.

Brown would pitch tiny, curved almonds from the sprawling almond tree in the family's backyard. When Xander was little, he would use a broomstick to spray almond joy out among the cactus in the neighborhood. The logic was simple: If he could track a tiny almond, a baseball would look like a beach ball.

When Xander got bigger, Brown trimmed the branches off a discarded Christmas tree and Bogaerts swung that.



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**Xander Bogaerts stands under the almond tree in his uncle's backyard where he learned how to play baseball as a boy.**

Brown also hung an old tire from the almond tree so Xander could practice his swing, building up his arms.

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In his pursuit of Bogaerts, Lord tracked down Brown. A beautiful friendship developed over baseball.

“I got to know Glenroy,” says Lord. “I said, ‘I’m here for two days, I need to see this guy.’”

Bogaerts’s mother, Sandra Brown (or the “Queen Bee,” as Lord calls her), was working off island as a social worker. Her orders were strict: Stay in bed.

But this was the Red Sox calling. Almost begging.

Brown, who can recite major league starting lineups from 40 years ago, was thrilled about the Sox’ interest.

“He said, ‘OK, I’ll work her,’ ” Lord says. “Finally he got [her] to agree to let us have [Xander] for a day.”

First impressions

The future of Red Sox baseball didn't look so hot when Bogaerts showed up at the field.

"Literally he's got bed head, he's a mess," says Lord. "He's got this beautiful smile. And everybody just looks at him and says, 'Xander's here!'"

"They couldn't believe it. He wasn't like, 'I'm the star and come kiss the ring.' He was just genuinely a sweet kid. He was just happy to be there.

"Everybody loved him and he loved them, and you could just see, extreme personality and the way he handled himself. I thought, this guy's going to be a good teammate."

During batting practice, Bogaerts hit two bombs over the outfield fence. Then they decided to have a scrimmage.

"He did some stuff that was ridiculous," says Lord. "It was all sand and rocks and the lighting is poor. We're playing and there's like two headlights and a guy's pitching to him. Even 80 [miles per hour] seems like 95 because you can't see the ball.

"First thing, there was a runner on second base and a ball hit up the middle. Talk about range, he went into deep center field, dove for the ball, spun around. He knew he didn't have a play at first but he might have a play at home. So from his butt he throws a strike to home plate and threw the guy out. So right away I check off baseball awareness."

Bogaerts crushed a home run into the trade winds, shattering a window in a house across the street.

"He looked like a thoroughbred, like a colt," says Lord. "He looked like a young Seabiscuit."

But Lord deflects any credit.

"I try to tell people a guy at Wal-Mart could've figured this one out," he says.

Lord usually files his reports to Boston, but for Bogaerts he sent the video to Craig Shipley, the Red Sox vice president of international scouting.

"I said, 'Watch this — the play up the middle,' and [Shipley] said, 'Holy [expletive]. I'm getting on a plane tomorrow.'"

The Sox signed Bogaerts for \$410,000, and his brother for \$180,000.

The Bogaerts boys took their signing bonuses and paid off the mortgages on their mother's and uncle's houses. They also bought cars for their mother and aunt.

Jair was traded to the Cubs as part of the compensation package for Theo Epstein. He is now a sports agent. Xander hit .296 last postseason and won a World Series ring, a first for a native of Aruba.

A handle on fame

Aruba has produced only five major leaguers, the best-known being Sidney Ponson, who pitched for the Yankees and Orioles, among others.

Baseball fields in Aruba are mostly devoid of grass. There is only one artificial turf stadium in this country of 100,000.

When Bogaerts went to the Red Sox' Dominican Republic camp in 2010, director Jesus Alou, who played 15 major league seasons, took a good look at him.

"My first impression was, here is a kid that can really hit, but if he doesn't improve his flexibility, we'll have to move him away from playing shortstop," wrote Alou in an e-mail.

According to Lord, what separated Bogaerts from the pack was his work ethic. The poise he showed last postseason came in part from the fact that he had already played in tournaments in Venezuela, Colombia, Curacao, Bonaire, Panama, St. Thomas, and Bangor, Maine, before he made it to The Show.

The seeds of Xandermania started in 2011, when Bogaerts was knighted by Aruba's governor and got his picture on the Wall of Fame after he helped the Netherlands win the International Baseball Federation World Cup. Bogaerts also played third base on the Netherlands team that reached the semifinals of the World Baseball Classic in March 2013.

But after helping the Red Sox win the World Series, Bogaerts had no idea what awaited him in Aruba.

"I had no clue, no idea about the hype, the fever back here," he says. "There was so much hype."

Bogaerts is not a Type A personality.

"I'm a very low-key guy," he says.

So he was surprised when the prime minister of Aruba and hundreds of fans greeted him at the airport.

"They went crazy," Bogaerts says. "There were balloons and a red carpet and a limo seven windows long, Little Leaguers and teenage girls screaming."

Bogaerts doesn't like crowds.

"Only baseball," he says. "Only playing."

'He has a big heart'

In November, Bogaerts's hometown of San Nicolas named a ballpark after him, complete with a photo of his smiling face atop the fence in center field. He was also awarded the first star on the "Walk of Stars" at a local mall.



"That's like our Hollywood Boulevard," he says.

Near the star at the Paseo Herencia Mall is a cigar and humidor shop. Linda Brown (no relation) runs the shop. She says Xandermania is real, that when Bogaerts slid headfirst on a triple in Game 3 of the World Series, the island pulsated with joy.

"It was so exciting," she says. "I was jumping around, screaming. Everyone in Aruba was in front of the TV."

Brown says she went to school with Bogaerts.

"He has a big heart," she says. "I've known him since he was 10. He's quiet, always quiet. He loves the sport."

But not everything goes smoothly at this tourist paradise, whose motto is "One Happy Island."



One day, Bogaerts was sleeping at his house and a taxi pulled up outside. It woke him up. Red Sox Nation had found him. Tourists from Boston were pleading to take pictures.

“I’m like, is this really a big deal?” Bogaerts says. “I mean, you come from the States here to get a picture? Yeah. I took it and then they left. They got happy just for a picture.”

Sandra Brown is a spiritual woman who helps battle domestic violence. She does not want people to treat her son differently.

“Not like a God,” she says.

“His life hasn’t changed, he still stands and does the dishes, and he cleans his car. He does that on his own, you don’t have to tell him to clean.”

Bogaerts spent the winter running the beaches, lifting weights, and doing agility drills.

He also hasn’t forgotten his fellow Arubans. He started the Xander Bogaerts Foundation in December.

“I was a kid and I was blessed enough to always have spikes and gloves and stuff like that,” he says. “But I played with kids that never had that. For them to have that and for me to support that is a big deal for me.”

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